

# DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 202 013

CS 206 275

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 TITLE What Is Writing For?: Writing in the First Weeks of School in a Second/Third Grade Classroom.  
 SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, D.C.  
 PUB DATE Oct 80  
 GRANT NIE-90840  
 NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Communicating in the Classroom (Madison, WI, October 15-17, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Audiences; Primary Education; \*Teacher Attitudes; \*Writing Instruction; \*Writing Processes; \*Writing Research  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Audience Awareness

## ABSTRACT

One segment of a year-long descriptive field study of school writing is described in this paper. In particular, the paper examines some of the uses to which writing is put in the first weeks of school in one second/third grade classroom. In doing this, the paper speculates on the writing curriculum in elementary schools and on the realization of that curriculum by means of teacher planning and the interaction of teacher and students in the course of everyday school life. The paper explains the data gathering process, which involved field notes, interviews with teachers and students, journals, and other student writings. It then highlights one particular "occasion for writing," a safety posters activity, in order to exemplify the multiple functions served by writing in the classroom and the roles played by teacher and students in undertaking them. The paper outlines the step-by-step development of the activity, including comments by the teacher and copies of the posters produced. (FL)

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WHAT IS WRITING FOR?: WRITING IN THE FIRST WEEKS OF  
SCHOOL IN A SECOND/THIRD GRADE CLASSROOM<sup>1,2</sup>

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Prepared for inclusion in the book Communicating in the  
Classroom, Louise Cherry Wilkinson, Editor, Academic Press.

CS 206 275

WHAT IS WRITING FOR?: WRITING IN THE FIRST WEEKS OF SCHOOL  
IN A SECOND/THIRD GRADE CLASSROOM

"Let us envision a class of students asked to write on the subject to which schoolteachers, jaded by summer, return compulsively every autumn: 'How I Spent My Summer Vacation'."

--Walter Ong, Interfaces of the Word

"The biggest problem with second graders is that a lot of them forget how to write over the summer."

--an elementary school teacher commenting  
on the first weeks of school

Introduction

It is easy to malign writing instruction in the elementary classroom. Critics have, for example, chided the stereotypic teacher holding a bundle of yellow, lined newsprint in front of a group of squirmy children and exhorting them to describe in prose the summer that has just come to an untimely end. But is that what teachers really do? And, if it is, what does the deadly September scenario tell us about the functions of writing as communication in the classroom?

The image is probably overdrawn and unfair. Writing and its instruction can be difficult tasks. And, in fact, we know very little about the best ways to teach writing and even less about the writing already undertaken in classrooms everyday. Prerequisite to improving writing instruction, it would be

useful to discover how writing presently functions in both the school and nonschool lives of teachers and children.

This paper is about writing in school life. It describes some of the uses to which writing is put in the first weeks of school in one second/third grade classroom. In so doing, it speculates on the writing curriculum in elementary school and on the realization of that curriculum by means of teacher planning and the interaction of teacher and students in the course of everyday school life. The aim of this paper is to discover whether there is anything else to writing in school than uninspired essay topics, dull pencils, and yellow newsprint.

#### Background of the Problem

In the past few years interest has grown among researchers from many disciplines in the process of writing as functional communication and in the social contexts in which writing is undertaken (e.g., Basso, 1974; Goody, 1968). Like their colleagues in anthropology and psychology, educational researchers rarely considered writing. When they did, researchers often overlooked the composing process and the communicative functions of writing in classrooms. They focused instead on the written traces left by individuals or groups. The writings of children typically were used in educational research and evaluation as artifacts from which to draw inferences about the cognitive abilities of the writer or about the adequacy of formal writing instruction. Moreover, the writings examined were almost exclusively the products of classroom activities called "English" or "language arts," and instruction was construed largely as drill and correction in the surface features of grammar (Moffett, 1968).

While there has been some speculation and much concern about the quality of writing and writing instruction in classrooms, there has been little investigation of the writing that actually takes place there. In addition, there has been little application of what we know about the social and intellectual functions of spoken language in classrooms (Cazden, John, & Hymes, 1972) to a consideration of school writing--the reasons it is undertaken, its many manifestations, the norms for its appropriate use. Indeed, there has been precious little of this sort of documentation of writing in any part of the lives of teachers or children (Hymes, 1979).

This study serves the ultimate aim of understanding the communicative worlds of teacher and child by examining classroom writing and its instruction. Writing is construed in this research as one expressive alternative available to members of a community. Having chosen that alternative, the writer has access to a repertoire of ways of writing. One of the places in which children gradually learn what that repertoire is and how to apply it is the classroom. By documenting communicative choice related to writing in one of the important social settings in a child's life, we may later be able to compare and contrast the uses of writing in that setting with their uses in other settings navigated by the child. In the end, these efforts may lead to a better understanding of the classroom as one environment for learning to write, of the teacher as one adult responsible to meet and nurture the child/communicator, and of the child her/himself as 'natural symbolist' (Gardner, 1980; Vygotsky, 1978, p. 112) and emergent writer.

### The Study

#### Overview

The research reported here is part of a year long descriptive field study of school writing. Two classrooms in a small city in central Michigan were the sites for the research. The classes studied were a second/third grade in an elementary school and a sixth grade in a middle school. Each class was taught by a team of two teachers, and in both cases one of the teammates served as a focal informant in the study. Data collected in the course of the study included the following:

1. field notes of classroom participant observation;
2. periodic videotapes of classroom activity;
3. viewing sessions in which focal teachers discussed and analyzed videotapes made in their classrooms;
4. interviews with both teachers and students about the writing done in their classrooms;
5. weekly journals kept by focal teachers recording their thoughts about the process of writing in their classrooms;
6. naturalistically collected samples of student writing.

The study was interdisciplinary in nature. Data collection and analysis reflected theoretical perspectives and employed methods from ethnography, sociolinguistics, and cognitive psychology (see Florio and Clark, 1979 and Clark and Florio, 1980 for details of the study).

This paper limits the scope of the larger study to the uses of writing in only the elementary classroom. Data used in the examination include only the field notes, interviews, journals, and student writings produced in this classroom. The report considers only one part of the school year--the first

few weeks--when participants negotiate the transition from home and summer vacation back to school and when the class becomes established as a working social unit. Finally, the report highlights one particular occasion for writing, the "Safety Posters," to exemplify the multiple functions served by writing in the classroom and the roles played by teacher and students in undertaking them.

### Locating Literacy in the Classroom

Analysts have written about the opacity of the process of acquisition of spoken language--about the fact that children are rarely taught directly the rules of the grammars and ways of speaking that they gradually acquire (e.g., Brown, 1973; Cazden, 1972; Hymes, 1974). We have come to understand that language is acquired in use, and that one practices speaking as social interaction, not as preparation for it. In a sense, children and their parents accomplish something extraordinary when language is acquired, but they do it by behaving in quite ordinary ways (Cook-Gumperz, 1975).

The process of acquisition of written literacy is equally opaque. We know, for example, that writing arises in communities at least in part because it enables members to perform the social and intellectual operations that literacy makes possible (Goody, 1968). People begin to write because, within their communities, they need to keep records, engage in commerce, or extend their social relations over time and distance. In addition, writing may profoundly alter the social and intellectual lives of its users once it is in place, changing their vision of what is and of what can be accomplished in human life (Goody, Cole, & Scribner, 1977). But while this remarkable social and intellectual process may be unfolding as the individual or the community becomes literate, writing itself is undertaken in ordinary ways in

the course of everyday life and commerce. The profound changes wrought by writing are rarely discussed or reflected upon by its users.

This state of affairs challenges the analyst interested in the process of acquisition to locate literacy in everyday life. Since the process is so largely unremarked upon, it must be sought by close examination of the occasions on which it is undertaken and the relation of its use to the life of the individual and the community. For the educational researcher, the challenge is to locate those school situations in which children come to know that writing is an available expressive option and that, having chosen it, one particular way of writing will best accomplish the social or intellectual function called for in a particular situation. Subsequently the analyst must examine what is newly possible for the child--and for the classroom group--as a result of having written. This is the sort of information, taken for granted by members of the educational community, that is neither addressed in teacher preparation nor accounted for in curricular descriptions, nor even 'counted' as writing and writing instruction by educators, children or parents. Yet it is precisely this everyday use of language that is at the heart of the process of becoming a competent communicator--in speaking or in writing (Hymes, 1974; 1979).

Addressing the problem that they have termed "locating literacy," Scollon and Scollon (1979) have pointed out that the phenomenon of literacy is "located in a complex of behaviors, attitudes, situations, values, institutions, and personal roles" (p. 6). Although there may not be precise agreement among members about the unique location of literacy in the social life of any community, there is some typification of the activities involving reading and writing among members of a group. The Scollons contend that

"this typification of literacy becomes clearer as we observe both the socialization process and as we contrast variations of socialization" (p. 6).

In our society, the classroom is one of the places in which socialization into literacy occurs. By thinking of writing in the classroom in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence, the analytic task becomes one of identifying the occasions on which writing is typically the preferred expressive mode and of discovering the attendant social roles and expectations of teacher and students on those occasions. It is within the medium of those social occasions that the analyst is likely to discover the values and beliefs about writing that are imparted implicitly and explicitly to the child in formal education.

The following questions therefore guide inquiry into the use of writing in the elementary school classroom: What types of occasions for writing are presented to or perceived by the child upon entry into school? What ways of writing are available to the child for use on those occasions? How does the child begin to differentiate among the functions of writing and the written forms appropriate to them? What role does the teacher play in this process? What other contextual forces are operant? To answer these questions it is helpful to begin at the beginning—to observe writing early in the school year, when it is most likely that the teacher will make manifest norms for the use of writing in school and when young students, fresh from home and summer, may make transgressions that are illuminating.

#### Description of Setting

Room twelve is the only room of its kind in the Conley Elementary School.<sup>3</sup> Its special nature has important implications for the initial uses of writing that can be observed there. In order to locate literacy

meaningfully in its social context, it is useful briefly to consider room twelve as an environment for learning.

Occupying an entire wing of the school building, room twelve houses four teachers and four cross-age homerooms--two at the second/third grade level and two at the fourth/fifth. The room has moveable walls, a large common area, and four classroom alcoves that can be isolated from one another or merged (see Figure 1). Mixed age interaction, independent and small group learning in centers, and a team approach to planning and teaching have been associated with room twelve since its creation in 1976.

The school of which room twelve is a part is known in the community as a lively and active place particularly effective in instructing children from a range of ethnic and economic backgrounds. Conley School receives Title I aid, and although many children attending the school come from the middle class households of employees and students of the nearby state university, many others are poor. Some children live in a large, government-subsidized apartment complex or in winterized summer cottages near the school. Many families are employed in local agriculture or the automotive industry, and unemployment has been increasing recently. A large number of Conley children from all economic levels live in single-parent households.

A controversial place since the wing was built, room twelve receives mixed reviews from teachers and parents. Some teachers consider it a challenge and a professional opportunity to work there, while others shun the room's potential disorder and lack of privacy in which to teach and plan. Similarly, some parents prefer less open environments for their children. However, it is not uncommon for parents from all backgrounds to inquire of the principal how their child can be assigned to room twelve. In fact, the

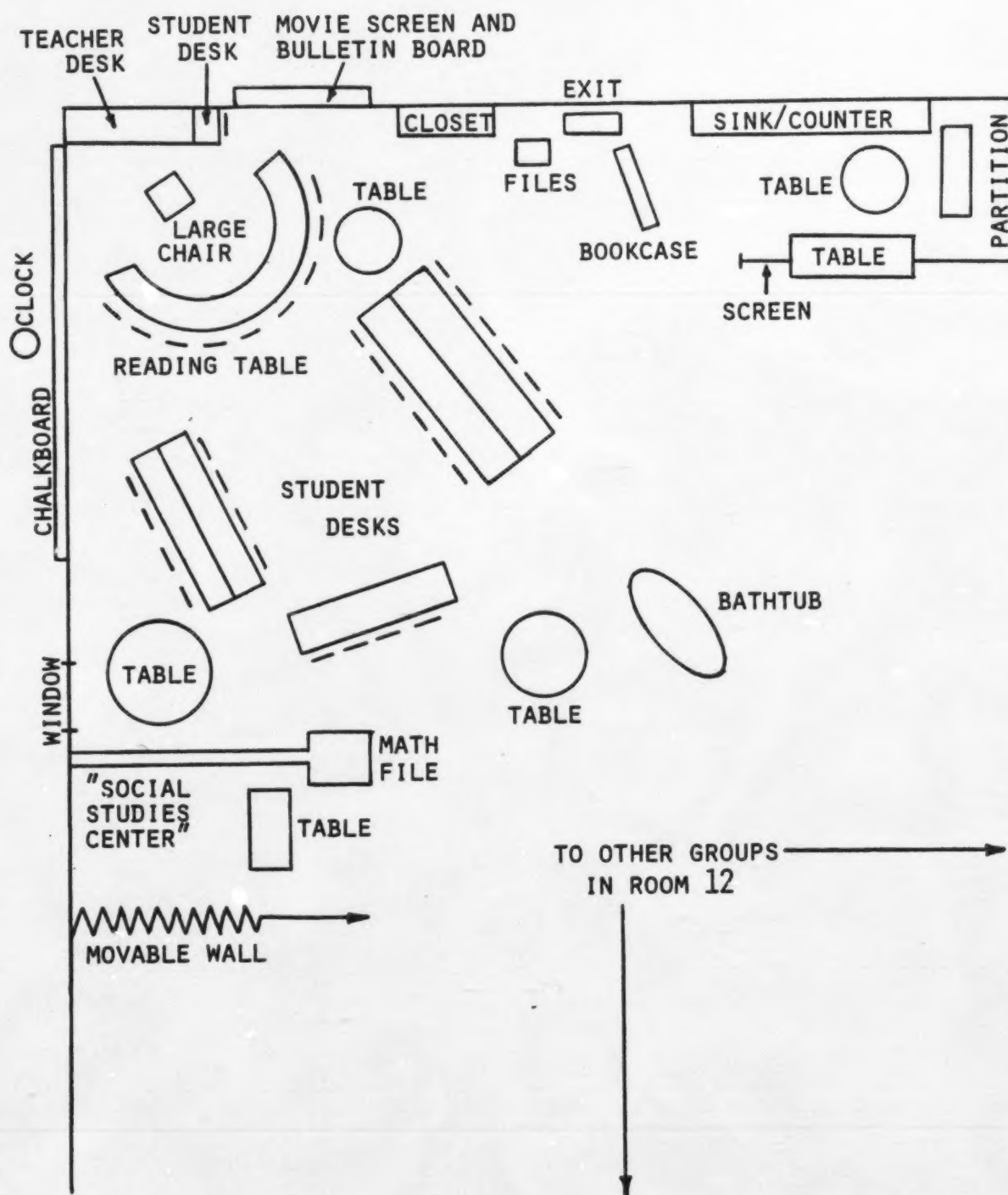


Figure 1. Map of Ms. Donovan's Classroom (Field Notes, 9/5/79)

room twelve teachers assert that many parents think that only the most able children are assigned there, that assignment to room twelve is a status symbol of sorts.

Although room twelve has changed over the years, the vestiges of the open education movement that inspired it are still apparent in its spatial arrangement and in the teachers' approaches to instruction. During the year students have the opportunity to make choices about the timing and format of their academic and social activities. In addition, children work in a variety of interactional arrangements including teacher-led large groups, small student groups, mixed-age tutorials, and learning centers.

Room twelve's openness, the large number of mixed-age students who occupy it (nearly one hundred), its special status in the building and community, and its ethos of student choice in learning give rise to many occasions on which writing is used to serve important social and academic functions.

#### Occasions for Writing in Room Twelve

Addressing the transition from oral to written ways of communicating in the life of schoolchildren, Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz have suggested that the move into literacy requires children to make some basic adjustments to the way they socially attribute meaning to the events and processes of the everyday world in order to be able to loosen their dependence upon contextually specific information and to adopt a decontextualized perspective (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1978, p. 16).

The school child moves toward decontextualization in language as (s)he begins to share thoughts in writing rather than in talk. In writing, (s)he must

often communicate with an absent audience, and lacks the prosodic and kinesic channels that have heretofore been an integral part of expression. (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1978). More generally, the child is called upon to elaborate thoughts and intentions in written ways as (s)he navigates a world of new personal relationships, new surroundings, and new interactional goals. In school the child cannot necessarily rely on shared understandings and expectations that may have abided in the home (Florio and Shultz, 1979; Shultz, Florio and Erickson, 1978). More will have to be made explicit in school, and writing will be one of the appropriate ways to share one's thoughts with others.

Observing that "all people have their uses for literacy in the context of their social needs" (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1978, p. 29), and that school in our culture may err in too narrowly defining literacy's functions and requisite skills, Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz advocate school experiences sensitive to issues of the transition from the primarily oral culture of family and childhood to the primarily written culture of school and work. They support writing experiences that "favor the learning of written culture through the medium of the oral culture" (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1978, p. 28). Ideally, in school, these experiences arise meaningfully in response to social and intellectual needs occasioned by the new environment of the classroom.

When second and third graders return from summer vacation to room twelve of Conley Elementary School, they encounter many new occasions calling for just such gradual adjustments from oral to written expression. Some of these occasions are planned by Ms. Donovan, their teacher, who is experienced in helping children manage the transition back into school--and back into writing. Others arise naturally, as part of the process of establishing the class as a

social unit with routines for management of time, activity, and social relations. Finally, some arise simply as part of getting to know a group of strangers.

What follows is the story of an occasion for writing in room twelve. The story is offered to give the reader a feeling for the kind of data collected and analytic approaches used in this study. In addition, the story is intended to show the following:

1. that writing arises in classrooms that are open to its possibilities;
2. that it helps to know about teacher plans, intentions, and beliefs to make sense of writing instruction;
3. that writing occasions can be negotiated and multifaceted.

The Safety Posters: Turning the Unexpected into  
an Occasion for Writing

The following paragraph is an excerpt from notes taken during an interview on Monday, September 17, 1979, the eighth school day of the year:

In our interview, Ms. Donovan described how she used an unexpected traffic safety assembly as an opportunity to do a writing exercise. The assembly included a film on bicycle and pedestrian safety and a talk on the same subject. After Ms. Donovan and her students returned to Room 12, she asked them to recall some of the safety rules that they had just heard about. Ms. Donovan said that she was very surprised at the terrific difficulty that the children had in remembering the safety rules. At first, they could remember only the general topic of the assembly. With some coaching and reminding, several of the rules were recalled. Then Ms. Donovan asked the students each to

choose one safety rule and draw a picture illustrating the rule.

These poster-size pictures, with the safety rules as captions, will be posted in the hallways as a service and a reminder to the other students in the school.

The Safety Posters Activity, as we have come to call it, is an early and telling example of occasions for writing in our primary grade classroom. It began with the unexpected: a school-wide assembly that Ms. Donovan learned of only upon arrival at school Monday morning. What began as an unexpected interruption of the school day grew into an elaborate series of learning experiences that extended over several days and, to some degree, involved children and adults throughout the entire school. What happened and how did it come about? To answer this question, let us "unpack" the above paragraph from the interview notes of September 17:

*In our interview, Ms. Donovan described how she used an unexpected traffic safety assembly as an opportunity to do a writing exercise.*

Commentary: This assembly was a school-wide event presented in the gym by two uniformed young women employed by the local police department. The young women were known by some of the children, as their summer jobs had involved monitoring bicycle safety. The assembly is a clear example of formal contact between the larger community and the school population. Bicycle and pedestrian safety are topics that are very relevant to elementary school children, and responsibility for the safety of school children is shared by school personnel, parents, public safety officers, and the community at large. Safety is a fundamental issue, and, in this case, a safety assembly took priority over classroom and academic issues. The fact that the assembly was unexpected, yet easily incorporated into the morning was, in part, a function

of the flexibility of the early weeks of school, when the daily and weekly schedules are not yet fully developed into relatively fixed routines. Ms. Donovan learned about the safety assembly before the children arrived and included it as the first entry on the daily schedule written on the chalk-board (Field Notes, 9/17/79):

On the board, JD has written the "plans for today." They are as follows:

Today is Sept. 17, 1979

Schedule

|               |              |            |
|---------------|--------------|------------|
| 9:20--10:05   | 12:15--12:50 | 2:45--3:00 |
| Assembly*     | Lunch        | Clean up   |
| 10:05--10:30  | 12:55--1:15  | 3:00--3:10 |
| Gym           | Centers      | Diaries    |
| 10:30--11:00  | 1:15--1:55   |            |
| Reading       | Math         |            |
| 11:00--11:15  | 1:55--2:10   |            |
| Recess        | Recess       |            |
| 11:15--11:30  | 2:15--2:45   |            |
| USR           | Science (2)  |            |
| 11:30--12:15  | Soc. St. (3) |            |
| Language Arts |              |            |

*The assembly included a film on bicycle and pedestrian safety and a talk on the same subject.*

Commentary: The 9/17/79 field notes describe the assembly as follows: "the young women talked about and showed several film strips about safety in walking or bicycling to school." The field worker who attended the assembly also noted that this was the first school-wide assembly of the year, that some students were loud and disorderly and were brought back to order by the school principal, and that the safety presentation was not smooth and spell-binding. One of the filmstrips actually burned up as it was being projected. In short, this assembly had as much to do with learning how to behave at an assembly as it did with safety rules.

It was during the assembly that Ms. Donovan had the idea of using this experience as the basis for a writing activity later in the morning. We do not know what triggered the idea, but our earlier interviews and observations suggest that Ms. Donovan was predisposed to make the most out of the unexpected. She valued writing and believed that school writing activities must have a clear purpose if they are to be successful. On the second day of school, Ms. Donovan and her students did another writing activity that began with the "common experience" of a film. She describes this activity in her journal entry of September 9:

I was pleased with Friday's writing lesson. Motivation was movie on word families, then students wrote and illustrated sentences utilizing a word family (e.g., Jim Rice slid on ice and landed in lice.) This type of open-ended lesson seems to be the most effective. Children with differing abilities can be as simplistic or sophisticated [as they want to] depending upon their creativity. Instruction is to the group, but the results are individualized without isolation from the total group.

As we shall see as the Safety Posters Activity unfolds, the structure of this occasion for writing includes an initial shared experience (the safety assembly), a clear purpose and audience, and the kind of open-ended opportunity for children to produce something that reflects their ability, creativity, and sophistication. The most advanced students are not held back, and the least advanced students can still achieve a measure of success. In short, the safety assembly probably triggered the plan for the Safety Posters Activity because the assembly fit Ms. Donovan's pattern or set of criteria for good writing activity. It seems that this "spontaneous planning" that Ms. Donovan engaged in is more frequently seen in curriculum areas like language arts, where there are few published series or kits, than in subjects like math, reading, and science, which are largely structured by published materials.

*After Ms. Donovan and her students returned to Room 12, she asked them to recall the safety rules that they had just heard about. Ms. Donovan said that she was very surprised at the terrific difficulty that the children had in remembering the safety rules.*

Commentary: Again, the field notes give us a clearer picture of what actually happened on that Monday morning. Ms. Donovan's students stayed in the gym after the safety assembly for physical education (10:15—10:30 a.m.). When the children returned to room twelve, they worked on reading worksheets, went to recess, then did fifteen minutes of silent reading. It was not until 11:35 a.m. (Language Arts time) that the children were asked to recall the safety rules taught in the assembly. Given so many interpolated activities, that the assembly itself was full of interruptions and distractions, and that the children did not know in advance that they would be expected to remember the

specific wording of the safety rules, it is not surprising that they had difficulty. The safety assembly was an experience removed in space and time from the classroom. The children had no props or memory aids to stimulate their recall.

*At first, they could remember only the general topic of the assembly. With some coaching and reminding, several of the rules were recalled.*

Commentary: In attempting to bring her plan into action, Ms. Donovan had to take on the role of "class memory" and "memory coach." She had assumed that the safety assembly experience would be sufficiently recent and vivid to serve as the common experience basis for the language arts activity. When Ms. Donovan discovered (to her surprise) that the children did not remember the specific safety rules, she changed her plan on the spot. The teacher's task now became to recreate the common experience in a form, place and time such that all the students had it available to them for use in the next part of the activity. The field notes (9/17/79, p. 3) show how this was done:

As part of language arts, Ms. D asks s's to "re-run" this morning's safety program and recall what they learned. At a piece of large white paper up front, Ms. D prints what they recall. The format is that an individual raises her/his hand. Ms. D writes down what (s)he says. Another s is asked to read it back.

Ms. D writes down what s's say in multicolor magic markers:

1. Don't run on the street without looking.
2. Don't take shortcuts you don't know.
3. Don't cross the street when the light is red.
4. When you ride your bike, keep your hands on the handlebars.\*

\*This formulation arrived at after several revisions. Ms. D

has said, "Take your time and re-state it, how you want to say it." In coming up with this one, s's chime in with alternatives; Ms. D asks them to let her re-state it.

(This activity resembles others I have seen so far. It is the generation of general information posters by the whole group with Ms. D acting as scribe.)

In coming up with sentences, Ms. D says, "Sometimes does it take a couple of times to get out what you want to say? That's OK." The person who offers the original idea has the final say as to how it is written down.

This process continues until ten safety rules are recorded. Notice that Ms. Donovan goes to some length to see that every student has a chance to be actively involved in the rule generation part of this process. Oral editing, friendly amendments, and reading aloud are all used to produce a document that every child has had a hand in and understands. Mechanics such as spelling and penmanship are taken care of by the teacher acting as scribe. The use of a rough draft is foreshadowed as Ms. Donovan says, "Sometimes does it take a couple of times to get out what you want to say? That's OK." In short, this part of the Safety Posters Activity constitutes a collective and largely oral preparation for writing that makes visible how the solitary, silent author could prepare to write.

Then Ms. Donovan asked the students each to choose one safety rule and draw a picture illustrating the rule. These poster-size pictures, with the safety rules as captions, will be posted in the hallways as a service and a reminder to the other students in the school.

Commentary: This was the point at which the full plan was first communicated

to the children, that is, the part of the plan that had to do with transforming what the students "knew" into graphic form. The students were given a choice, within a clear and limited set of alternatives, and this element of student choice seems to have been an important part of Ms. Donovan's beliefs about effective learning activities, particularly in writing. The combination of drawing and writing is also a striking aspect of this task, as illustrated in Figure 2. Other researchers have commented on the close and mutually supportive relationship between drawing and writing, especially in the early grades (Clay, 1975; Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 1978; Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan, 1977). The field notes give a vivid and more complete portrayal of the writing/drawing phase of the Safety Posters Activity (Field Notes, 9/17/79, pp. 4-5):

Next Ms. D asks s's to think of ways to help remind the rest of the school of these rules. The s's suggest the following:

"take them around"

"put them up on the hallway"\*

"tell them not to do it"

\*This is response to Ms. D's question: "How could each one of you help remind them of one rule?"

(It is interesting to note that, in response to the charge, the s's do not generate any means that are specifically writing-related. They do, however, offer symbolic alternatives that are largely visual.)

After the s's make their suggestions, Ms. D. says, "I had an idea, too. Each (person) could make a poster with one rule and put it in the hallway." The s's say, "Yeah!"

Ms. D: "Do a picture and write the rule on the bottom."

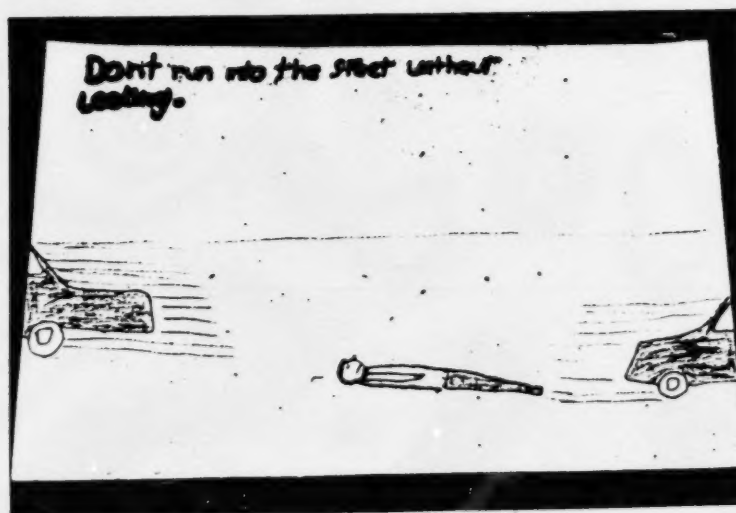
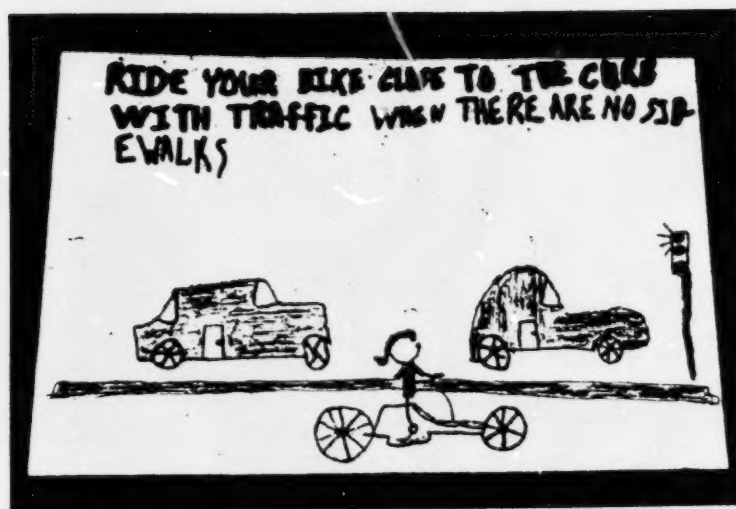


Figure 2. Sample Safety Posters (Field Notes, 9/17/79)

Before getting started, an additional rule is generated:

11. Don't ride a bike too big for you.

At 11:50, as s's go to their seats to start, Ms. D says, "At the end I'll write the rule for you or you can write it yourself in magic marker. The picture has to be done in crayon."

The s's sit quietly at first. Overheard is the following exchange:

S: "What are you going to do?"

S: "I don't know; I'm still thinking."

Some s's prefer to write the rule first; others make pictures first. Several s's found the task difficult for several reasons, e.g., they did not want to do a rule that they found out a lot of other s's were doing; they couldn't draw what they needed to illustrate the rule (such as a bicycle). The upshot of these difficulties was that by the end of the available time, some s's were completely finished while others were just getting started.

Notice that both the purpose of the posters and the audience for the posters are specified before crayon touches paper. The students were guided by their teacher to participate in "coming up with the idea" of drawing safety posters. All of the necessary elements were now in place: the list of rules on what Ms. Donovan calls "experience paper," crayons, poster paper, an opportunity for choice and originality, a sense of shared ownership of the project, and the dual motivation of having one's work displayed in the hallway (a place of honor) and of doing good (perhaps even saving a life) by reminding other schoolmates of the safety rules. Ms. Donovan takes a further step to minimize threat by offering to write the rule herself on the bottom of the posters of those students who want or need that help.

The time allowed for drawing and safety rule writing was about twenty-five minutes (11:30--12:15). As the field notes indicate, there were wide individual differences in task completion. This is an issue that Ms. Donovan returns to again and again during the course of the year. For example, the issue was first raised in the September 17 interview (p. 4):

In discussing planning and diagnostic testing, Ms. Donovan raised a perennial problem for teachers: how to deal with the relatively large differences in the speed at which children work when they are working independently. "What should I do with the kids who finish fast? When I give them fun and extension activities to do I feel that the children who finish more slowly are being gypped. I like closure--everyone must finish. I don't want the slower students to get farther and farther behind."

(It is interesting to note that this problem of individual differences in working speed has shown up so early in the year. We should take care to note the ways in which Ms. Donovan deals with this issue as she tries to resolve an apparent conflict between her personal philosophy and value on equal opportunity and the practical realities of a mixed ability class. She seems to recognize that faster is not always better. This might be especially true in writing.)

Epilogue: The Safety Poster Activity continued to develop, as though it had a life of its own. By Wednesday, September 19 (two days after the safety assembly) all of the posters were finished. That day, in a conversation at lunch with the kindergarten teacher, Ms. Donovan had the idea that her students should make small group presentations of their posters to the

kindergarten children as a prelude to displaying the posters in the school hallways. Arrangements were made to do this on Thursday, September 20. During the morning and afternoon that day, groups of three or four of Ms. Donovan's students were sent to the kindergarten room to show their posters and teach the younger children the safety rules. The field notes for September 20 and 21 show how this process developed:

(9/20, p. 1): At 9:20, s's gather in the center. Ms. D says, "The kindergarteners are just learning to get along together." This comment is prelude to her sending several s's to kindergarten to hang posters and tell about them. (Yesterday at lunch, Ms. D negotiated the time and purpose of the safety poster sharing with Mr. B, the kindergarten teacher.)

(9/20, pl 1): Dani returns from the kindergarten and says that she was scared to read her poster to the children. She says that, "the kids didn't even listen," but that she read it and showed them her drawing anyway.

(9/20, p. 3): [At about 11:00] Before the s's left for pictures, they began to talk about their experiences of sharing the safety posters with the kindergarten earlier this morning. Some said they found it "embarrassing" and "scary." Some s's said they thought it might have helped to practice beforehand. They agree that s's who will go this afternoon should practice first. Ms. D tells the other s's to help them practice by asking questions "that you think the first graders would ask." As a few s's stand up to do it, their peers applaud their efforts.

(9/20, p. 4): At 12:55 the s's reconvene in the center. Ms. D,

who had and a chance to talk to Mr. B (the kindergarten teacher) at lunch, says, "Mr. B said that you guys did a really good job this morning, even if you were nervous." Then five s's leave with their posters to talk to Mr. B's afternoon class, saying that they are nervous (Lea has a stomach ache).

(9/21, p. 3): At 12:55, after lunch, the s's gather in the center. Afternoon roll is taken and one of the s's reads the "afternoon plans." Three s's leave for the kindergarten with their safety posters. Ms. D asks them, "Do you know what yours says?" She has them read back what's written on the posters before leaving.

(9/21, p. 3): At 1:05, s's return from kindergarten.

JD: "How'd it go?"

S: "Terrific."

S: "Not very many questions, though."

Oral presentation of the safety posters to the kindergarten children added a number of things to the Safety Posters Activity. The second and third grade authors' sense of audience was undoubtedly heightened. They saw very clearly that it was useful to re-examine, edit, and rehearse what they had written if an audience was expected to understand their messages. They learned that writing and drawing could be used to focus oral communication (in this case, teaching), and that a graphic product could serve the author as a reminder and illustration of his or her message. Ms. Donovan's students also learned from one another's experience and served as constructively critical audience for the dress rehearsals. And finally, this phase of the project served as a meaningful connection between two groups of children within the school, showing on a small scale how writing can contribute to

the building of a social system when members are separated in space and time.

### Conclusion

The Safety Posters Activity was just one of literally hundreds of occasions for writing that took place in the two classrooms in which we worked during a full school year. Our analysis of and commentary on the Safety Posters Activity have raised a number of issues about how, why, and under what circumstances written literacy is acquired in schools, and what role the teacher plays in this process.

Like many other occasions for writing noted in the earliest weeks of school, the Safety Posters Activity began with a shared experience not originally planned by Ms. Donovan. Also, like many other early writing occasions, this one had importance in both the school and non-school lives of the students. It was an expressive enterprise that moved the students beyond the boundaries of room twelve. Ms. Donovan seized the opportunity to turn an unexpected event into an occasion for writing. Her engagement of students in a series of related expressive activities, both written and oral, involved her in a special sort of pedagogical role. Ms. Donovan extended her planning and teaching beyond the bounds of prepared instructional materials and district mandates for the language arts. She created writing curriculum with her students as the class jointly produced a situation that would both support the practice of writing and be supported by that writing. Ms. Donovan and her students participated in an extended communicative enterprise that involved the practice of written literacy as they prepared and shared documents they called "The Safety Posters."

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Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>The authors acknowledge Janis Elmore, June Martin, Rhoda Maxwell, and William Metheny for their contributions to the study on which this report is based.

<sup>2</sup>The work reported here is funded by the National Institute of Education (Grant no. 90840). The opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the position, policy, or endorsement of the National Institute of Education.

<sup>3</sup>To ensure the privacy of informants in this study, pseudonyms are used throughout when referring to school, teachers, or students.